

# **THE AMERICAN VETERAN**

## **EPISODE 9**

### **PART 1**

JIM BENSON, HOST

HELLO, I'M JIM BENSON.

THIS IS "THE AMERICAN VETERAN," A PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAM PRODUCED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

THIS MONTH WE WILL TAKE YOU FAR AND WIDE TO SHOW YOU SOME OF THE PROGRAMS VA PROVIDES TO YOU, AMERICA'S VETERANS, AND TO HONOR YOUR SERVICE.

OUR FIRST STOP – THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN STATES OF MONTANA AND WYOMING – WHERE A PAIR OF VA EMPLOYEES ARE HONORING NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS, OPENING DOORS BETWEEN VA AND INDIAN COMMUNITIES. THEY'RE HELPING GET VITAL BENEFITS AND SERVICES TO VETERANS WHO, THROUGH THEIR SACRIFICES, HAVE EARNED THEM. SCOTT WALLACE REPORTS.

WALLACE: THIS MAY SEEM LIKE AN UNUSUAL MEETING PLACE FOR VA STAFF: THE MEDICINE ROCKS, SACRED TO THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE INDIANS OF MONTANA.

JAMES FLOYD, DIRECTOR, SALT LAKE CITY MEDICAL CENTER: THAT'S AMAZING HOW OLD THEY ARE SOME OF THEM ARE JUST COMPLETE WASHED AWAY.

WJ "BUCK" RICHARDSON, JR., MINORITY VETERANS COORDINATOR, VA ROCKY MOUNTAIN HEALTH NETWORK: LOOK AT THE ONES ON THAT FLAT ROCK. YOU CAN BARELY FIND THEM.

WALLACE: BUT JAMES FLOYD AND BUCK RICHARDSON AREN'T EXACTLY YOUR AVERAGE NINE TO FIVERS, AND THEIR WORK IS ANYTHING BUT ROUTINE.

RICHARDSON: YOU CANNOT DO THIS JOB IN AN OFFICE. OUR OFFICE IS WHEREVER WE HAPPEN TO BE, WHEREVER THE VETERANS ARE.

WALLACE: BUCK RICHARDSON IS MINORITY VETERAN PROGRAMS COORDINATOR FOR THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN HEALTH NETWORK. JAMES FLOYD IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE VA'S SALT LAKE CITY MEDICAL CENTER. HE'S ALSO A NATIVE AMERICAN WITH EXPERIENCE IN INDIAN HEALTH ISSUES

FLOYD: "WE HAVE TWENTY TWO TRIBES IN OUR NETWORK, AND WHEN I NOTICED THAT THEY WERE NOT GETTING ANY ATTENTION, I KNEW THAT WE HAD AN OBLIGATION TO TAKE CARE OF THEM, BECAUSE THEY WERE VETERANS, THAT SOMEBODY NEEDED TO GO DO IT."

WALLACE: TOGETHER, JAMES AND BUCK ARE ON A MISSION – TO BRING VA BENEFITS TO SOME OF THE MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED TWENTY THOUSAND NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS WHO HAVE SERVED THE MILITARY IN GREATER NUMBERS PER CAPITA THAN ANY OTHER ETHNIC GROUP, BUT ARE LEAST LIKELY TO TAP THE VA'S RESOURCES.

FLOYD: "WE TOOK IT ON PRETTY MUCH AS A PERSONAL OBLIGATION, THEN, TO START DOING THINGS THAT WOULD BREAK DOWN THESE BARRIERS, FIRST OF ALL, AND THAT WAS TO DEVELOP SOME TRUST. AND SECOND OF ALL THAT WE WOULD BRIDGE THE DISTANCE THAT WE WOULD COME OUT TO WHERE THEY WERE, AND THEY FELT MORE COMFORTABLE IF WE WERE IN THEIR TERRITORY "

WALLACE: THE TWO TEAMED UP AND DECIDED THEY NEEDED TO SPEND MORE TIME IN INDIAN COUNTRY. AND THEY'D SEEK OUT INDIAN VETS ON THE RESERVATIONS – PEOPLE TRUSTED BY THE LOCALS WHO LIVED NEARBY TO HELP NATIVE VETERANS GET THEIR VA BENEFITS.

A NEW PROGRAM WAS BORN, CALLED TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVES.

CHARLIE BEARCOMESOUT, TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVE, NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION, MT: A VETERAN THAT'S IN THAT SITUATION WOULD RATHER TALK TO ANOTHER TRIBAL MEMBER. I THINK THE TRUST HAS TO BE THERE

WALLACE: THE TRIBAL VETERANS REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAM HAS GIVEN THE VA A CONCRETE PRESENCE IN DISTANT, OFTEN HARD-TO-REACH COMMUNITIES, MAKING SERVICES ACCESSIBLE TO NATIVE VETERANS WHO IN THE PAST HAD GIVEN UP HOPE OF GETTING THE BENEFITS THEY DESERVE FOR HAVING SERVED THEIR COUNTRY.

JAMES AND BUCK OFTEN COVER HUNDREDS OF MILES A DAY BETWEEN RESERVATIONS AND THEIR MEETINGS WITH LOCAL TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVES, OR "TVR'S."

THIS WEEK, THEY WILL RACK UP 1,200 MILES, DIPPING FROM MONTANA DOWN INTO WYOMING, BEFORE HEADING BACK INTO WESTERN MONTANA.

FLOYD: WE CAN'T COVER ALL THAT TERRITORY BY OURSELVES, SO WHEN WE HAD COMBAT VETERANS SAYING, "WE'D LIKE TO HELP YOU," WE WANTED

TO FIGURE OUT SOME WAY THAT THEY COULD BE A PART OF WHAT WE WERE DOING.

WALLACE: HERE ON THE WINDRIVER RIVER RESERVATION IN CENTRAL WYOMING, BUCK AND JAMES HELP SHOSHONE TVR LYLE WADDA FILE A CLAIM FOR JUDY DAY, SISTER OF A DECEASED VETERAN.

LYLE WADDA, TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVE, WIND RIVER RESERVATION, WY: I LET THEM KNOW I'M THERE FOR THEM, WHENEVER. IT'S LIKE I ALWAYS SAY, "THERE ISN'T A TIME CLOCK ON THIS THING."

WALLACE: LYLE HELPED JAMES AND BUCK RECRUIT DARWIN NIEDO – A COMANCHE INDIAN AND VIETNAM COMBAT VETERAN FROM THE 101<sup>ST</sup> AIRBORNE – TO BRING BENEFITS TO VETS ON THE FAR-FLUNG STRETCHES OF CENTRAL WYOMING.

WALLACE: THEY PAY A CALL ON STANLEY MYERS, AN 84- YEAR-OLD VETERAN WHO WAS BLOWN OFF HIS FEET THREE TIMES AND LOST MOST OF HIS HEARING ON THE BATTLEFIELDS OF ITALY IN WORLD WAR TWO.

STANLEY MYERS, WW II VETERAN: ITS JUST LIKE YOU ARE STANDING THERE AND THE CONCUSSION IS SO GREAT, SOMEBODY IS RUNNING FULL FORCE JUST HITS YOU IN THE BACK AND KNOCKS YOU DOWN; BLOWS YOU RIGHT ON THE GROUND.

WALLACE: MYERS IS NOT NATIVE AMERICAN. BUT THE TVR'S ARE TRAINED TO SERVE ALL VETS, NOT JUST INDIANS.

DARWIN NIEDO, TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVE, CROWHEART, WY: WHEN YOU SAY, "TRIBAL VETERAN REP," THEY SAY, "OH, THAT'S JUST FOR INDIANS." I SAY, "NO, IT'S NOT; IT'S FOR VETERANS. VETERANS. ARE YOU A VETERAN?"

WALLACE: NOT ONLY DO NATIVE AMERICANS SERVE OUR COUNTRY IN HIGH NUMBERS, THEY'RE ALSO MORE LIKELY TO TAKE ON DANGEROUS FRONTLINE ASSIGNMENTS.

RICHARDSON: ESPECIALLY IN WARTIME SITUATIONS, THEY WANT THE DIRECT COMBAT FOR THE WARRIOR STATUS.

WALLACE: AND THAT MEANS INDIAN VETS LIKE DARWIN NIEDO ARE ESPECIALLY IN NEED OF MEDICAL CARE – AND COUNSELING.

NIEDO: THE INDIAN VETERAN WAS MORE SUBJECT TO PTSD AND THE INDIAN VETERAN IS THE MOST UNDERSERVED OF ALL VETERANS. THAT'S WHY THIS TVR PROGRAM WAS BORN.

FLOYD (ADDRESSING TRIBAL COUNCIL): GOOD MORNING MR CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL. ITS GOOD TO BE HERE.

WALLACE: BY THE END OF THE WEEK, JAMES AND BUCK REACH THE FLATHEAD RESERVATION IN WESTERN MONTANA, HOME TO THE SALISH AND KOOTENAI CONFEDERATED TRIBES.

RICHARDSON: I GUESS OUR GOAL IS TO REDUCE THE BARRIERS THAT A LOT OF VETERANS HAVE FELT IN THE PAST, TO REDUCE THOSE BARRIERS AND BE ABLE TO GET THOSE BENEFITS OUT TO THE VETERANS OF THE RESERVATION.

WALLACE: THE VA REPS MEET WITH THE TRIBAL COUNCIL IN A FRANK GIVE AND TAKE.

TRIBAL COUNCIL MEMBER: LIKE YOU SAY, THE NUMBER OF INDIAN VETEANS THAT ARE AROUND WHERE THEY DO NEED HELP.

LLOYD JACKSON, TRIBAL VETERAN REPRESENTATIVE, FLATHEAD RESERVATION, MT: IT MAKES ME FEEL GOOD TO SEE THEM PEOPLE GET THEIR BENEFITS. WITHOUT SOMEBODY GUIDING THE VETERANS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF FILLING OUT THESE FORMS, THEY WOULD BE LOST. WHEN YOU TALK TO VETERANS, THAT'S WHAT YOU FIND, THAT THE PAPERWORK IS OVERWHELMING. AND THAT'S WHAT I DO, I HELP THEM FILL IT OUT. I'VE FILLED OUT ENOUGH SO I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE WHAT THE QUESTIONS ARE.

BILLIE ROGERS, NATIVE AMERICAN VETERAN, FLATHEAD RESERVATION, MT: WE FINALLY GOT THE PAPER WORK TOGETHER AND PUT IT BACK IN. SON-OF-A GUN, JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, I FINNALY STARTED GETTING COMPENSATED

WALLACE: BUCK AND JAMES PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR THE TVR'S AND KEEP THE PROCESS MOVING FORWARD.

RICHARDSON: IF WE CAN OPEN THE AVENUE OF CONTACT FOR ONE PERSON EACH TRIP, WE'RE OKAY. WE'LL GET THERE. WE MIGHT DO IT ONE VETERAN AT A TIME, BUT WHEN YOU TAKE CARE OF ONE VETERAN, THAT VETERAN WILL GO TELL A LOT OF OTHER VETERANS WHAT HAPPENED.

FLOYD: GETTING A HANDSHAKE FROM SOMEBODY AS WE LEAVE, PAT ON THE BACK, ASKING US TO COME BACK: THAT'S A GOOD FEELING. WHEN WE HAVE WORK AS WE ARE LEAVING TOWN, THAT A GOOD SIGN.

RICHARDSON: THE VA IS CHANGING, AND THE VA IS NOT WHAT IT USE TO BE. THAT'S WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO GET ACROSS TO ALL THE VETERANS, SO

THAT THEY KNOW IT IS A VA THAT CAN HELP THEM. IT'S OUR JOB TO MAKE SURE WE GET THE BENEFITS TO THOSE VETERANS. THAT'S WHO OUR BOSS IS.

BENSON: NOVEMBER IS NATIONAL AMERICAN INDIAN HERITAGE MONTH. FOR US, IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY TO HONOR NATIVE AMERICANS WHO HAVE SERVED IN OUR MILITARY, DATING BACK TO THE REVOLUTION.

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